DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 654 CS 214 721

AUTHOR Farstrup, Alan E.
TITLE Standards for the English Language Arts: Issues and Current Status.
PUB DATE 2 Dec 94
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (44th, San Diego, CA, November 30-December 3, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Curriculum; English Instruction; Evaluation; *Language Arts; Secondary Education; *Standards
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues; English Teachers; International Reading Association; National Council of Teachers of English; *National Standards

ABSTRACT

The answer to the question, "What's happening to the standards project organized by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)?" is that the project is going forward. Though its federal sponsors rejected it in the fall and winter of 1993-94, the project is continuing under the auspices of the two organizations; they are funding the project themselves because English teachers must have a voice in the formation of policy related to educational standards and testing. The change in political contexts as a result of last fall's election has done nothing to quell the controversy about standards. The religious right is concerned that the standards movement will promote a set of federally-based rules which will interfere with family prerogatives. Many others among the public and in the teaching profession seem concerned that the development of national standards may mean, in effect, the imposition of standards that are lower than they might wish. Some fear that problematic rules and regulations will be imposed. Nevertheless, interest in standards among policy makers remains high. Certain language in "The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994" implies a concern with not only curriculum standards but performance standards; it suggests the possibility of funds being allocated according to a school's success in the latter area. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Standards for the English Language Arts: Issues and Current Status

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Alan E. Farstrup, Ph.D, Executive Director
International Reading Association

National Reading Conference
December 2, 1994 - San Diego

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Farstrup
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

ED 379 654

"What's happening to the IRA/NCTE Standards Project?" That's a question I hear too often to count as I talk to teachers, university folks, IRA members and others around the country. It's a reasonable question and one that we intend to provide some answers to today since there is significant progress on our standards project to report. Terry Salinger and our other speakers today will have more to say about that. This question, however, refers to a much larger sense of confusion--even bewilderment--and concern that seems to exist out there in the world when it comes to the status of educational reform and the role of standards. Ever since the publication of the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* some some ten years ago talk of reform has been everywhere, commissions have been formed and dissolved, recommendations have been put forth with great fanfare, and a tremendous variety of legislation at the national and state levels has been initiated and put onto the nation's law books. I sometimes wonder if all the time, effort, hot air and money spent on promoting reform and standards ideas had instead been funneled into the nation's classrooms in the form of better classroom libraries, improved teacher preparation and more opportunities for teacher professional development that we might all have been better off.

This sense of confusion, of a lack of focus is sensed my many in our profession. For example, in a recent article in the newsletter of the Consortium for Policy Research and Education, Susan Furman of Rutgers University comments about the status and nature of the current reform discussions, especially those oriented to standards-based reform. Let me read a brief quote from her article:

> "Many policy makers, educators and analysts are having problems explaining the role of coherent, standards-based policy in providing direction and support for changes in teaching and learning. In policy rhetoric, it frequently appears that reforms consist of only standards and assessments. Other central components, like support for classroom change through focused and enhanced teacher education and professional development, are less visible. The broader social agenda, like providing for children's health and security, also gets short changed in reform discussions. Public skepticism is understandable in reaction to messages suggesting that setting standards and measuring achievement, in and of themselves, can some how lead to better teaching and learning."

CS214721

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Furman's point here, in my view, seems to be that reformers - and those who follow their activities - are having a lot of trouble conceptualizing or making sense of the range of choices and changes that would be necessary to really improve things. There seems to be a real lack of specific and concrete strategy for creating change. Many are even questioning the assumption that the kind of change being proposed and discussed is even desirable. Assuming that standards development will - or can - go forward without a hitch and the assessments which many are calling for can be developed (and you should feel free to question these assumptions!) it is still not apparent to many who know the education scene best what needs to happen next as a result of having standards and assessments in place.

In addition to a seeming lack of concrete strategies, and the apparent mismatch between the rhetoric calling for standards-based reform and the reality which exists in many communities and states, we are faced with political contexts in our nation which appear to be changing rapidly. The recent 1994 Congressional election is the most clear cut sign that the way we do business at the Federal level at least will change and that the very existence of standards-based reform is going to be called into question. Just how this will all unravel or play out (you choose) is still not entirely clear. One camp would argue that standards-based reform is very much alive and well since the original impetus for this type of reform grew out of the efforts of the nation's governors working with the Bush and Reagan Administrations in the years prior to the current Democratic administration. According to this logic (that the standards movement is alive and well) standards-based reform has been a Republican agenda all along and we therefore will see continued support under the new majority regime in Congress.

On the other hand, one could argue (and many do!) that there has been increasing controversy and criticism related to standards-based reform, criticism coming from, among others, the religious right and from related groups in that particular quadrant of the American political spectrum. These conservative groups argue that the standards movement promotes a set of rules that are federally based and that interfere with local and family prerogatives. In states like Kentucky, Ohio, and Virginia we see strident opposition to the standards-based reform movement. This opposition has linked standards-based reform to outcomes-based education and we all know that the term "outcomes-based education" (OBE) has become a rallying point for those religious fundamentalists who oppose government interference in family matters, especially when it comes to teaching personal values. The politically loaded term "values" comes into play here and many conservative elements see any effort by government to influence "family values" to be objectionable. (Unless, of course, the values being promoted are the "right" ones!) The influence of the most conservative political groups in our society will be felt in the coming political debate and the impact on the national standards movement is an yet unclear.

Many others among the public and within the profession seem to be concerned that the development of national "standards" may mean, in effect, the imposition of standards which are lower than we might wish. Some educators in our cities and in the countryside are concerned that the standards movement from the federal level will mean the imposition of problematic rules and regulations without the necessary funding to carry them out. Still others in our profession speak about their deep concerns over what they perceive as the potential (or even certainty) of national standards leading to a disempowerment of teachers and students and to a reversion to the most undesirable elements of the mastery learning or "bits and pieces" educational approaches that they see having burdened our schools and students in previous decades. In short, there is a wide range of voices out there expressing trepidation or outright opposition to the development and implementation of standards for teaching and learning.

Yet, interest in standards among what we so deftly refer to as "policy makers" remains high in spite of the concerns I've cited. Here's an example. I recently received a summary of the federal act re-authorizing the Elementary And Secondary Education Acts of 1965. This recently passed legislation is referred to as "The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994." It rests on the framework of the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act" and encourages educators to align and link various reform efforts in order to create "comprehensive solutions" for schools in order to meet students' needs. The term "alignment" is critical here in my view. It carries many implications for how any nationally developed consensus Standards for the Teaching and Learning of the English Language Arts might be applied (or misapplied) throughout our nation. In my opinion, the term "alignment" is not far removed from the concept of "linkage." That is, the linkage of standards for curriculum to standards for assessment to performance standards to the assessments themselves and, ultimately, to the allocation of funds or other resources to so-called "successful" schools. While I may most certainly be overdrawing this relationship for the sake of simplicity, I don't think we should ignore the possibilities that exist for a misappropriation of our standards efforts. There certainly will be some form of articulation of curriculum standards with assessment and evaluation standards. The important question here is what the nature and purpose of that linkage will be and the means by which assessments will be implemented to the benefit of our students.

In reading the summaries of "The Improving America's Schools Act" nearly every page of the 30 page summary contains some reference to the application or impact of standards in education reform. Many of these references relate to the language surrounding the re-authorization of the Title 1, compensatory education, program (Just as we finally learned to call it Chapter 1!). In referring to Title 1 the following language is used "(Title 1 . . .) supports local educational agencies in providing high quality opportunities for students in high poverty schools to meet the same challenging state content and performance standards already developed for all children (under

Goals 2000 or another process)." In another reference to Title 1 the summary again speaks of the role of standards: "States will anchor the program by developing challenging academic standards and linking Title 1 with their overall school reform efforts." Under the new legislation Title 1 promotes the alignment of educational components, requires states, districts, and schools to connect to Goals 2000, requires states receiving Title 1 funds to submit plans that demonstrate they have challenging content standards specifying what children are expected to know and be able to do, requires states to invent challenging performance standards, and requires states to develop sets of high quality state assessments which are geared to the content standards and which will be used to determine whether children in these schools have met the performance standards. In other words, alignment and linkage seem to be important concepts within the new school improvement legislation. This is but one example of the powerful and continuing influence of the notion of national standards. Because Title 1 is the biggest direct federal funder of local school programs it is especially significant because money talks!

It is within this context of social and political turmoil that we find the IRA/NCTE Standards Project today. This project, as you well know, has had quite a history. We began with high hopes in the Fall of 1993 with the convening of our National English Standards Advisory Board and of our various writing task forces. The yeoman efforts of staff at the University of Illinois and of IRA and NCTE, as well as the many dedicated volunteers who worked on the various phases of the project, resulted in draft documents that were revised and approved during the Fall and Winter months of 1993 and 1994 only to be met by rejection from our federal sponsors. The whys and wherefores of that rejection are a whole 'nother story, a story which we need not go into here but which is both interesting and frustrating to all of us who were involved. The bottom line is that the two associations - IRA and NCTE - are determined to go ahead using their own resources. That is , IRA and NCTE will put their own money and effort on the line in order to be sure that the voice of the profession is heard in the reform debate, that the best interests of teachers and students are adhered to, and that the two associations will clearly articulate their standards for the English Language Arts, standards to benefit ALL students. That's why we are still involved. That's why the partnership with NCTE is alive and well and so important.